

Trafomatic Primavera Initial Impressions | Headphone Reviews and Discussion

head-fi.org/threads/trafomatic-primavera-initial-impressions.932900

May 21, 2020 at 7:25 PM

This is an overview and preliminary review of my recently purchased Trafomatic Primavera headphone amp. I bought it myself, and I have not been asked for this review, nor promised any form of reward or benefit for it. I have no relationship with Trafomatic or Audio Prana other than as a customer.



1. Ordering process & Delivery. Well, unless you've seen/heard one at an audio show, you're pretty much ordering it blind, and with almost no reviews to guide you. Fred Crane at Audio Prana in Gloucester, MA is the distributor/dealer for North America. And if you live in the US, that's who you order from. Fred's a great guy, giving freely of his time to answer any questions about the Trafomatic product line. One of the things that Fred shared is that Trafomatic has only built Primavera amps for customers, and has not supplied any to the trade press. So much for in-depth reviews. And they build about 6 per year.

Trafomatic will finish the amp in just about any RAL color, and can finish it either gloss or with Soft-Touch, a rubbery-like coating. I believe 6moons mentioned this coating in their review of the Lara preamp. The coating is quite cool, and adds to the tactile enjoyment of the amp. Although I had originally set my sights on a sort of Pearl Oyster White color, Trafomatic happened to have enough of the matte black rubber coating material in stock to offer it to me at very little additional charge, but with some additional wait time. I accepted that offer.

It's not cheap. But when you look at some of the other TOTL statement headphone amps from people like MSB, and Viva, you can see that the Primavera is price-competitive in that class. And I happen to know that there are folks out there pairing \$50k+ amps with the SR1a and Susvara.

Color and finish are the only choices. Everything else is stock. Pay your deposit, and settle in for the wait, which can be anywhere from 8-16 weeks. I ordered mine in late February, and it shipped from Serbia early April. When it finally arrived in Massachusetts, Fred turned it around immediately and shipped it overnight to me in California.

It arrives in a big wooden crate, which grossed out at 44.91kg or 99 pounds. My FedEx delivery guy asked for help with it.

2. Build Quality. The Primavera is beautiful, especially if you like tube amps. The fit, finish, construction and weight, are very much what one would expect from a \$15k amp. The layout is very much in the style of the deep, slightly narrow, SET look like Decware and so many others. It is built like the proverbial tank. As noted above, it is available in just about any color you could want.



3. The Setup. The signal chain is NAS—>Cisco Switch via fiber—>Roon Nucleus+—>MSB Select II w/ Network Renderer 2—>Trafomatic Primavera. ICs are Iconoclast. Power cords are Cerious Graphene. The MSB has a Gigafoil 4 and .5m BJC Cat 6 Ethernet in front of it. The Nucleus+, GigaFoil, and Cisco are powered by a Keces P8 [I share this for info only, not to start a cable/power supply/network discussion].

The Susvara specs are:

Frequency Response : 6Hz-75kHz

Impedance : 60Ω

Sensitivity : 83dB

Weight : 450g (15.9oz)

It's that 83db sensitivity that seems to be the challenge for most amps. Obviously, any amp capable of driving insensitive speakers would probably do just fine; pretty much all speaker amps and a few headphone amps. Say, something like a Schiit Vidar, which I initially used to drive my SR1a, would be fine. And it is fine. I tried it out one day on the Susvara, and it didn't sound half bad. I also own a HeadAmp GS-X Mk2 and an LTA Z10E. Both do quite fine by the Susvara, the Z10E to my ears slightly better than the HeadAmp, and at 2.5x in cost, one might hope so.

4. Initial Listening Impressions. I purchased the Primavera primarily for use with the Susvara. I also listened to my LCD-4, the MySphere 3.2, and the Focal Utopia. IIRC, a fellow Head-Fier opined that the Primavera would not be a good match for the Susvara due to a perceived impedance mismatch. I think this may have been speculative.

Inasmuch as the Sus was one of the headphones used to voice the Primavera's development, that strikes me as an odd speculation, but to each their own. There is no impedance mismatch I can discern. The Trafomatic does not have a 60Ω setting, but it's 50Ω setting is more than close enough. In the well-done owner's manual, the user is cautioned that an impedance higher than a headphone's rated impedance will likely cause distortion [it does], while one lower than the headphone's rating should be fine [it is].

The tracks I listened to repeatedly [there were many more, but these I made into an evaluation-specific playlist]:

ARTIST,	ALBUM	TRACK
Chris Rea,	The Road To Hell,	The Road To Hell 1 & 2
Cowboy Junkies	Trinity Revisited	Blue Moon Revisited
Nirvana	Nirvana	The Man Who Sold The World
Manu Katché	Unstatic	Unstatic
GoGo Penguin	V2.0	Murmuration
Mark Knopfler	Shangri-La	Boom, Like That
Dead Can Dance	Into The Labyrinth	Yulunga

Fiona Joy Hawkins	Into The Mist	Opus 1-3
Yo Yo Ma	Vivaldi's Cello	Cello Concerto in C minor
Robert Shaw & ASO	Verdi Requiem	Dies Irae
Ozzy Osbourne	Ozzmosis	Perry Mason
Tsuyoshi Yamamoto Trio	Midnight Sugar	Midnight Sugar
Massive Attack	Mezzanine	Teardrops
Propellerheads	Decksanddrumsandrocksandroll	Take California
Dire Straits	Brothers In Arms	One World
Getz/Gilberto	Getz/Gilberto	The Girl From Ipanema
Boz Scaggs	Dig	Thanks To You
Dire Straits	Brothers In Arms	Brothers In Arms
Linkin Park	Meteora	Breaking The Habit
Rush	Moving Pictures	Tom Sawyer
Jim Keltner	Sheffield Drum & Track Disc	Amuseum
Steely Dan	Aja	Josie
Supertramp	Crime of the Century	School
Black Dub	Black Dub	Surely
The AIX All Star Band	Moonlight Acoustica	Moonlight Acoustica
Pink Floyd	A Momentary Lapse of Reason	Sorrow
Eddie Money	Playlist	Take Me Home Tonight
Dead Can Dance	Labyrinth	The Wind That Shakes the Barley
Fazil Say	Complete Beethoven Sonatas	Sonata No. 14 [Moonlight]
Peter Gabriel	So	Mercy Street

Here's the TLDR version: the Primavera makes the Susvara. It makes it as good as, maybe better than the Stax SR-009S in all but the most minute and intimate of detail, and on female vocal, percussion, and piano transients. In the ability to disambiguate layers, it is on par with the Stax/T2 combo. From a PRAT, slam, presence, and richness perspective,

it exceeds the RAAL | Requisite SR1a, though it is audibly inferior to the SR1a in detail and speed, transient attack and decay. So is everything else.

5. Specific SQ Topics.

a. It's really tough to beat the Stax SR-009S/T2 combo on piano and female vocals. As wonderful as the SR1a is, it sometimes feels like the speed takes precedence over the fullness. Depending on the recording location—*e.g.*, a church vs. a studio, the size of the hall, etc.—and how much “air” one desires around one's ears, one can easily find the SR1a and the Stax a tossup. But if one wants to really hear and feel the orchestra during something magnificent like *Verdi's Requiem*, neither the SR1a nor the 009/S can deliver what the Primavera/Susvara can. This is also true of smaller scale stuff, like GoGo Penguin's *Murmuration*, which has some visceral bass lines in the build up to its climax. The Stax and RAAL simply cannot do what the Susvara does with the Trafomatic. Similarly, the Cowboy Junkies' *Blue Moon Revisited* reveals some significant differences between the cans. There are wonderful bass lines in this track, that the Sus reproduces better than the other two cans. But there is also soundstage, air, and transients that both the SR1a and Stax reproduce slightly more realistically. [Note: I apply some EQ in Roon to the SR1a when listening, to bring the bass up a touch, but it's still no match for the Sus. and sometimes the Stax.]

b. I mentioned disambiguating layers above. Take a recording from the old Phil Spector wall of sound era, or a more modern equivalent like Eddie Money's *Take Me Home Tonight*, or almost any massed symphonic/choral work like the *Requiem* or *Beethoven's 9th*. The Susvara will separate and reveal the various layers upon layers that such recordings deliver [either as a bit of a gimmick in the Spector case, or more naturally in a symphonic hall]. On my HeadAmp and Z10E, those layers are more “congested” on the Susvara, and thus quite a bit less desirable than the TOTL amps for the Stax and the RAAL. But that changes with the Trafomatic. Like peeling and reassembling all the layers of an onion, or some Tony Stark virtual 3D design holography, both the whole and the parts become audible. The Susvara is not quite as fast as the Stax, or the SR1a, but its presentation of the fuller audio spectrum provides proper weight, and thus imaging and location, to those instruments that produce the bass lines. Cymbal crashes may be slightly thicker, but the tympanis nearby are more realistic.

c. For some people, electrostats can be a bit zingy. I think that is usually a shortcoming in the amplification, but maybe not all of it. A good planar should have none of that, and very nearly all the speed of the electrostat. The Susvara does. I found myself replaying some tracks like *Blue Moon Revisited* and *Murmuration* over and over again, just to delight in the balanced combo of speed and top-to-bottom SQ.

d. I apologize to anyone who is offended by this, but the LCD-4 is just not in the discussion. Whether on the Primavera or the HeadAmp or the Z10E, it comes across as too warm even dark, veiled, and thick. I had not listened to my LCD-4 in quite some time; I was startled at how poorly it compared to the other cans. On bass, it thumped all the others but the Susvara, but that's not enough to carry the day. Granted, I am a bit of a speed and detail freak, but compared to the other three cans, the LCD-4 sounded veiled and a bit sluggish.

6. Conclusion. Although I have been without my SR1a for a couple of weeks while the HSA-1a is having some updates fitted, I have little doubt that it will return to being my favorite overall listening kit, because of its amazing transient speed, air, and soundstage, while the Susvara/Primavera will be my 1a listening choice. But I could be wrong. We'll see. That slam is awfully addictive. I don't love my T2/009S combo any less, but its use case has been narrowed. If I want air, speed, the sense of shimmer, and a little more comfort as compared to the SR1a, I will listen to the Stax. But for overall top-to-bottom SQ, the Susvara/Primavera is my new #1.

